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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ASMARA 000426

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [ER](#)
SUBJECT: ENGAGING THE ERITREAN DIASPORA

REF: ASMARA 267

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The Eritrean diaspora is a complex mixture of asylum seekers who fled during the Liberation War, political outcasts who were shunned during the country's formative years, Eritrean youth (some of whom have never seen Eritrea and others who visit mainly during the summer), and current-day refugees fleeing an oppressive regime and increasing poverty levels. Although Eritreans tend to form tight-knit communities abroad, there are deep internal divides that reflect the overall nature of the country's political landscape. While many ex-fighters believe Eritrea to be a shining example of heroism and accomplishment, just as many recognize that the country's growth has been stunted by ill-conceived Eritrean government (GSE) policies. Political exiles have either lost credibility by being associated with Ethiopia or have faded into the background. Refugees wish to flee indefinite national service or GSE persecution, but are often unwilling to speak out against the GSE. The youth are the most vocal group. They dominate discussions on social media networking sites, they build websites, establish magazines, and form student groups at universities. While many diaspora youth see themselves as American, British, German, Australian, and so forth, they also don an "ultra Eritrean" persona when necessary. Diaspora youth are very protective of Eritrea and, while they are only in Eritrea for a few weeks at a time, will vehemently defend the country against criticism. As this is the case, it is diaspora youth that are the best hope for outreach efforts geared towards promoting dialogue on Eritrean politics and society. Whether for or against the GSE, diaspora youth across the board are ready to speak their minds and should be a top priority when funding NGOs and programs focused on engaging the diaspora. End Summary.

DIASPORA BASICS

12. (SBU) Remittances to Eritrea are estimated at 11% of the GDP, among one of the highest in Africa. Diaspora Eritreans are taxed 2% of their income, payable to the nearest Eritrean embassy or Eritrean community center/bookstore. Post estimates the GSE receives \$7 million USD from tax revenues from the diaspora in the United States alone. Additionally, the GSE strongly "encourages" the diaspora to donate even more money through mandatory community meetings. These extra funds are often promised to go to the Martyr's Fund, which is meant to supplement the income and livelihood of the

thousands of crippled ex-fighters who fought for independence. It is not known to what extent these funds benefit the large ex-fighter community; however, one look at the squalid conditions of the Denden camp in Asmara (a disabled veteran housing complex located on the grounds of the old Kagnew station) suggests that a substantial sum has been skimmed off the top.

13. (SBU) Eritreans have strong family and community ties and usually pay the 2% tax and mandatory donations in order to be able to visit, retain property, and send supplies and money to their families in Eritrea. Although Post has heard increasing reports of diaspora members who refuse to pay the 2% tax, documented proof of payment is a necessity to maintain family and property ties and obtain vital records from the GSE. For example, the GSE will not honor requests for birth certificates, copies of marriage certificates, or other vital documents without proof of the 2% tax payment. For similar reasons, many Eritreans in the diaspora choose to remain silent rather than speak out against a government they disapprove of; it is common for the GSE to arrest or harass family members of outspoken individuals.

ESCAPED THE 30 YEAR WAR

14. (SBU) Many Eritreans fled the country during the 30-year Liberation War and resettled in Europe and America. Even though they left the country, they regularly sent financial contributions to the cause. These Eritreans ended up in a variety of occupations overseas: doctors, professors, taxi

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drivers, nurses, and other professions. After the war, some returned to Eritrea to assist with the nation building process. Professor Asmerom Legesse is a prime example. He studied in the United States at Harvard University during the war and returned within days of independence. He continues to live in Asmara working for the civil society organization he created, Citizens for Peace in Eritrea (CPE). While he readily admits the GSE policies have largely inhibited the organization's work, particularly in attempting to establish economic self-sufficiency among areas affected by the Border War, he is nonetheless proud to serve his country.

15. (SBU) Other Eritreans who fled are more skeptical of the government. Perhaps one of the more telling tales is the area known as Space 2000 in Asmara, a neighborhood of half-finished houses financed by the diaspora and intended to be summer homes. During the initial financing and construction process, the government accused the private construction companies of corruption, arrested many in the industry, and left the diaspora with incomplete houses that have remained vacant for years. This type of chronic letdown has left many expat Eritreans very skeptical of the current government. Despite this sentiment, they do not speak out against the government for fear of losing contact with families.

POLITICAL OUTCASTS

16. (C) In the first years of Eritrea's independence, Isaias' bid to consolidate power left many ex-fighters and former political leaders out of the loop, and sometimes imprisoned (reftel). Some of the ones that successfully fled the country formed opposition groups based in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. While it is difficult to determine how much influence these groups have among the diaspora, many Eritreans in country have expressed their thorough distaste for any political group that comes from Ethiopia. Other political outcasts find themselves unaffiliated, yet still vilified, such as Dr. Bereket Habte Selassie, an author, ex-fighter, and former chairman of Eritrea's Constitutional Council. Dr. Bereket is often regarded as the primary architect of Eritrea's unimplemented constitution, written in

1997, and put on the shelf since. Most recently, he gave the keynote speech on June 18, when several hundred Eritreans in D.C. marched on the Eritrean embassy in protest of GSE policies. Despite Dr. Bereket's fame as a pillar in the country's political formation, the speech went largely unnoticed in Eritrea, in part because he has already been thoroughly discredited by GSE media. In 2007, Sofia Tesfamariam (a diaspora Eritrean living in D.C. who often writes anti-Western articles at the behest of the GSE) wrote a scathing commentary on Dr. Bereket, labeling him a "mercenary and an opportunist." This tends to be the fate of most Eritrean former political heavyweights. They either join a well-publicized network based in Addis, and thus lose credibility, or drop out of politics altogether.

REFUGEES

17. (C) Today's refugees flee the country in droves (Ref B). While some are genuinely persecuted by the GSE (religious dissidents, too successful in the private sector, close association with foreigners, etc.), the vast majority simply want to escape poverty, or, in the case of the young, avoid the grinding labor and poor wages of interminable national service. A young writer for ELEM (Eritrean Lifestyle and Entertainment) Magazine recently left Eritrea for a new life in London. In Eritrea she experienced no direct persecution; she was only prohibited from achieving her goal of running her own magazine. She told Poloff her deep disappointment in the GSE's restrictive policies that prevent young Eritreans from achieving their full potential. Her comments are not unique. Many young Eritreans choose to flee the country in hopes of being something other than a soldier or a woefully underpaid teacher.

18. (C) Those that are able to escape usually end up in refugee camps in Sudan, Kenya, South Africa, Libya, Egypt, or

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throughout Europe. Once outside the country, the majority do not discuss politics. Many of those that disagree with the GSE would rather bide their time silently in the refugee camp than risk being outspoken and having GSE forces harass or arrest family back in Eritrea. Once resettled, refugees often congregate in pre-existing Eritrean communities, such as in London, Stockholm, Washington, D.C., and Oakland, California.

THE YOUTH

19. (C) Eritrean youth in the diaspora are a divided community. For those that support the GSE, their unwavering dedication likely stems from their isolation as a minority in another country and from the ever-present hand of the Young People's Front for Democracy and Justice (YPFDJ) to enforce a "proudly Eritrean" identity. The YPFDJ bills itself as a movement to build "strong, conscious, and patriotic Eritrean youth." The sub-goal is to strengthen support abroad for the PFDJ and the GSE. The YPFDJ website, youngpfdj.org, is littered with editorials aligned with GSE viewpoints, such as "NGOs and the Victim Industry." Social networking sites abound with YPFDJ groups (37 groups on Facebook and a newly formed Twitter account as of October). Although many YPFDJ gatherings are merely cultural exhibitions or parties, the youth involved are indoctrinated early on in pro-GSE propaganda, thus further fueling many diaspora youth's overt infatuation with Eritrea and vehement defense of the GSE.

110. (C) There are also expat youth who oppose the GSE. Anti-GSE Eritreans who join the myriad of Eritrean Facebook groups and attempt to challenge the GSE status quo are immediately put through the wringer. They are either labeled as traitors, "woyane" (derogatory term for Ethiopians) in disguise, tools of Western powers, or worse. As a result, many youth who love their country but oppose the government

remain silent. Despite the condemnation of their peers, the silent, yet dissatisfied, contingent of expat youth is increasing. Semere Kesete, the former president of the Asmara University student union, and several other young expat Eritreans are part of a new wave of youth diaspora attempting to break the silence. Providing opportunities for young expats to engage in political dialogue is an important focus area for diaspora outreach.

ENGAGING THE DIASPORA

11. (C) The internet is already awash with reports detailing the atrocities committed by the GSE. What expat Eritreans, especially the youth, gravitate towards instead is an interactive platform where they can propose ideas and discuss solutions. Post recommends three ways for NGOs applying for DRL or other USG funds to successfully engage the diaspora and encourage critical analysis of the GSE:

- Focus on non-political groups. Direct engagement with Eritrean opposition groups, such as the EDA, will likely be dismissed by moderate diaspora Eritreans as an attempt to overthrow a peaceful government. Working with non-political groups, such as Eritrean student associations, will provide credibility and will not immediately be dismissed as having a political motive.
 - Let Eritreans lead the discussion. A panel discussion on religious freedom in Eritrea should be led by Eritreans and not by outside analysts. While it is difficult to find Eritreans willing to talk about these issues, it is well worth the search. A discussion devoid of Eritreans will, again, be dismissed by the diaspora.
 - Give the youth an alternate voice. As of now, the YPFDJ is the primary outlet for young Eritreans in the diaspora to express pride in their culture. Currently, there is no non-EDA aligned counter to the YPFDJ. Encouraging young Eritreans to create their own group and providing them opportunities to promote Eritrean culture and dialogue will ultimately increase the space for discussion.
- McMullen